

COMMODIFICATION OF HUMAN BEINGS AND GENDER IN THE GREAT GATSBY: A MARXIST READING

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ABSTRACT

American author Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in 1925. The novel is considered an epitome in representing class conflict at various levels and the researcher discusses those conflicts within Marxist-Socialist system and explains how capitalists, or bourgeoisie, have successfully enslaved the proletariat or working class, through production of goods and economic policies, and the complex relationship between the base and the superstructure through intensive reading of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Hegemony, Alienation & Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Harold Bloom writes in his guidebook *The Great Gatsby* that, “Fitzgerald constructed this novel about which he once declared in a letter that ‘sounded almost like pulp when one simply wrote down the bones of the story’” (20). The novel surely does not belong to the ‘pulp’ genre at all, as it has been granted the status of a classic in American fiction history. In this novel, the main character Gatsby falls in love with Daisy, a young woman from a rich family, but then at that time, he lacks financial resources and self-assurance in his past necessary to offer marriage. He leaves then, determined to make his fortune that he may return to marry her and support her in a manner reasonable for her expectations and her class. He changes his name and becomes Jay Gatsby. He then makes a good fortune, although by unlawful means, bootlegging and organized gambling, in addition to that he gets all this swiftly, he is not in control to deal and organizes this huge wealth to which so many of Daisy’s suitors were born and capable of handling as well.

Gatsby’s house as well as his clothing and car— they all speak of his current wealth, making his treasure less alluring than that of ‘old money’ because ‘old money’ is opposite to and quite contrasting against a nouveau riche. In the quest to lure Daisy to him, he bought home near hers and begins to throw huge parties, solely meant to attract her interest, such that she would eventually wander into his home during one of his parties, discover him, and fall in love again. Instead, Nick Carraway, Daisy’s second-cousin, moves in next door. It is only later that Gatsby grasps the family-relationship and thus asks Nick to help him meet Daisy and make it look like an accidental meeting. Nick helps him and Gatsby learns that Daisy is unhappily married to Tom Buchanan, an opulent loud mouth. Daisy is impressed with the things Gatsby has in his collection and also she is irresolute, changeable, and more complicated than Jay Gatsby accepts. As well, Daisy’s wedding with Tom offers her profits and securities which Gatsby does not and could not offer at that time.

After Tom confronts Gatsby during a drunken lark in the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan, everyone leaves in separate cars. Daisy and Gatsby race back in his car and, with Daisy driving, they strike down and kill a woman coming out to meet them, Myrtle Wilson, Tom's insipid and mistress. Daisy and Gatsby drives away, not even stopping. Myrtle's husband, George, is immediately distressed, so much so that he becomes murderous. George had seen the car previously, and because of the fact that he knew Tom through his garage business, George uncovers the information about who owned the strange car. He then goes after and kills Gatsby. Ultimately, no one appears at Gatsby's funeral with the exception of his broken-down father, Nick, and a senile partygoer. While as Daisy and Tom travel abroad and George Wilson is sending to prison, Nick proceeds with his life with a lesson that dreams, even malformed dreams such as that of Jay Gatsby's, they drive us counter to a mysterious world. Unquestionably, the novel contains far more than a mere simple dream being shattered.

Kathleen Dixon Donnelly writes in her blog entitled "Such Friends": Maxwell Perkins and Ernest Hemingway":

Fitzgerald himself wrote to Maxwell Perkins, his famous editor at Scribner's, that it was his intention to write an intricately crafted novel along the lines of his heroes, Conrad and Thackeray, and one that would be wholly different than anything that had come before. Other critics say that Conrad is not exactly the right stylistic precursor. To them, Henry James would be more appropriate, given James' weaving of essential—and only essential—details.(par.2)

However, the answer from critics has long contended about the idiosyncrasies in Gatsby's stylistic backgrounds, its complex layers, and its universality. The text of *The Great Gatsby* gives even the casual reader much to think about because of the structure of the novel being distinctive with is its language as well; plus, full is its plot, and so effortless it all appears. Harold Bloom writes in *Bloom's Guides: The Great Gatsby*:

Fitzgerald himself actually wrote the novel's epigraph. As a statement fronting the book, it could have been instructions given to Jimmy Gatz on how to approach the one for which he pinned: Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; If you can bounce high, bounce for her too, Till she cries "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover I must have you! (21)

A MARXIST READING

Social, political, economic theories based on the writings of Karl Marx assume that the transition from capitalism to socialism is part of the growth of human civilization. Marxism prospered in the 19th century as a practical view of history which offers a chance and an explanation of how the working classes could change their world to a much better one. Marxism presented commentary and explanation of social structures with respect to social, economic and political understanding of the nature of the reality. Marxism is about the economic power and the moving force in the life of human beings as Ann B. Dobie writes in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*:

According to Marx, the moving force behind human history is its economic systems, for people's lives, are determined by their economic circumstances. A society, he says, is shaped by its "forces of production," the methods it uses to produce the material elements of life. The economic conditions underlying the society are called material circumstances, and the ideological atmosphere they generate is known as the historical situation. This means that to explain any social or political context, any event or product, it is first necessary to understand the material and historical circumstances in which they occur. (87)

In literature, Marxist methodology is to study the connection between a text and the society that reads it or the society it depicts within the text. Its questions basic and traditional philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and all this was articulated by Marx in his two works, namely: *The German Ideology* (1845) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). The former is famous for explaining the concept 'Dialectical Materialism' which is one of the core beliefs of Marxism. Marx adopted Hegel's concept of 'synthesis' which explained how workers can lead a class war and establish new social order. Engels and Marx both assert that as Charles E. Bressler writes in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, "Consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness" (193).

According to *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels developed the idea of how bourgeoisie enslaves the working class through economic policies and production of goods. Both writers proclaimed the beginning of *Communism* in their conjointly written *Communist Manifesto*, and Peter Barry sheds light on this issue in his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*:

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Marxism is a materialist philosophy: that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world or of forces beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact. (150)

The exploitation of one social class by a financially better class is seen as an epitomic virtue of capitalism, and it was at its zenith in the nineteenth century. The result of this exploitation resulted in alienation, which is the state in an individual or a condition or a stage collectively in a society that occurs when a worker is 'de-skilled' (a condition where a workers skill is exploited and reduced to nothing more than a manual labor with less amount given in return) and made to perform 'fragmented', 'repetitive tasks'. Barry writes:

In the older 'pre-industrial' or 'cottage industry' system of manufacture, home and workplace were one, the worker completed the whole production process in all its variety, and was in direct contact with those who might buy the product. These alienated workers have undergone the process of reification, which is a term used in Marx's major work, *Das Kapital*, but not developed there. It concerns the way when capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labor force', so that, for instance, the effects of industrial closures are calculated in purely economic terms. People, in a word, become things. (157)

Also in Russia, we have the founder of Russian Marxism George K. Plekhanov. His works *The Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908) and *Art and Social life* (1912). And we have Vladimir Lenin wrote *Party Organization* and *Party Literature* where he directly linked 'good literature' with 'working class' movement, claiming the literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat. Also the revolutionary Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin.

Also, Marxism appeared outside Russia by the Hungarian George Lukacs, his theory was known as reflection theory, as Charles E. Bressler writes in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*:

Believing that a detailed analysis of symbols, images, and other literary devices would reveal the class conflict and expose the direct relationship between the economic base and the superstructures reflect in art. (197)

The philosopher and drama critic from Germany, Bertolt Brecht, in his dramas, frequently interrupted the drama with a forth right charm to spectators with a song or a monologue to keep the on lookers cognisant of the ethical and social

matters to which they were being exposed in the drama and called it 'Alienation effect'. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci also contributed to this thought and created the concept of 'hegemony', which is how the bourgeoisie use 'cultural institutions' to maintain power in capitalist societies.

THE GREAT GATSBY: A MARXIST READING

The Great Gats by condemns capitalist culture by presenting the effects of capitalist ideology even upon those who are its successful products, and it does so through its representation of how *commodification* begins and enslaves the whole working class. A commodity or an object possesses a specific value, not with respect to for what it can be used or what may simply be called 'use value,' but in terms of the money or other commodities for which it can be traded which is called exchange value; or else in terms of the status in a specific society it grants or its ownership confers known as 'sign-exchange value'. Louis Tyson in her *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* writes:

An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and neither form of value is inherent in any object. Both are forms of social value: they are assigned to objects by human beings in a given social context. Commodification, then, is the act of relating to persons or things in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value. Of course, commodification is a necessary function of buying and selling, and thus it is a necessary function of capitalism, which depends for its survival on buying and selling. However, as the novel illustrates, commodification, especially in the form of sign-exchange-value. (67)

In *The Great Gatsby*, we see commodification so clearly embodied in the character of Tom Buchanan who is also the richest man in the novel. Tom relates, narrates and boasts about his wealth and deals with the world only through his money. It can be said that for him, all things and all people are commodities. For him, women are commodities which have a price and can be bought, used and thrown out when needed. For example:

- Tom's marriage to Daisy Fay is undoubtedly an exchange of Daisy's youth, beauty, and social standing for Tom's money and power and the image of strength and stability.
- Properly, the symbol of this 'purchase' was the \$350,000 string of pearls Tom gave his bride-to-be.
- In the same way, Tom uses his money and social rank to 'purchase' Myrtle Wilson.
- Numerous other working-class women with whom he has affairs, such as the chambermaid with whom he was involved three months after his marriage to Daisy.
- And the "common but pretty" (112; Ch. 6) young woman he picks up at Gatsby's party.

Tom's consistent choice of lower-class women can also be understood in terms of his commodified view of human interaction: the "markets" his socioeconomic status where it will put him at the greatest advantage—among women who are most desperate for and most easily awed by what he has to sell. Of course, Tom's acts of commodification are not limited to his relationships with women. Because capitalism promotes the belief that "you are what you own"—that our value as human beings is only as great as the value of our possessions—much of Tom's pleasure in his luxurious possessions is a product of their sign-exchange value, of the social status their ownership confers on him. "I've got a nice place here," he tells Nick, adding, "It belonged to Demaine, the oil man" (12; Ch. 1) as if the house's "pedigree" could confer a pedigree on him. We see this same desire to flex his socioeconomic muscles, so to speak when he toys with George Wilson concerning the mechanic's wish to buy Tom's car in order to sell it at a profit. Given that Tom was born

into enormous wealth, apparently more than he could ever spend, why should he need the socioeconomic ego boost provided by such posturing?

Tom Buchanan is likely to make us sympathize with anyone who is dependent upon him. Daisy is not merely an innocent victim of her husband's commodification. In the first place, Daisy's acceptance of the pearls—and of the marriage to Tom they represent—is, of course, an act of commodification: she wanted Tom's sign-exchange value as much as he wanted hers. And certainly, Daisy is capable, like Tom, of espousing an idea for the status she thinks it confers on her, as when she commodifies disaffection in order to impress Nick: As Lois Tyson writes in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*:

"You see I think everything's terrible anyhow," she went on in a convinced way. "Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I know. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything." Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's.... The instant her voice broke off... I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said.... [I]n a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (21–22;Ch. 1) (72).

Daisy's extramarital affair with Gatsby, like her earlier romance with him, is based on a commodified view of life. She would never have become interested in him had she known that Gatsby was not from "much the same strata as herself... [and] fully able to take care of her" (156; Ch. 8), and when she learns the truth during the confrontation scene in the hotel suite, her interest in him quickly fades. When she lets Gatsby take the blame for Myrtle's death, while she beats a hasty retreat with Tom, indicates that her commodification of people, like that of her husband, facilitates the cold-blooded sacrifice of others to her convenience. Custody of Daisy implies that Gatsby gets what he really wants:

- The astable sign that he belongs to her socioeconomic class, as Lois Tyson writes in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, "a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were... redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (155 –56;Ch. 8)" (74).
- Ownership over Daisy becomes the transcendental sign of power; the 'decisive commodity sign' in Gatsby's eyes and also the society to which he belongs. *The Great Gatsby's* illustration of the capitalistic regime and its idiosyncrasies and the debilitation effects, the novel surely is a powerful critique of capitalism as well as itself a subtle reinforcement of capitalism's repressive ideology. As Tyson writes:

This counter movement operates in three ways. First, the unflattering portraits of George and Myrtle Wilson deflect our attention from their victimization by the capitalist system in which they both struggle to survive. Second, because Nick is seduced by the American dream Gatsby represents, his narrative romanticizes the protagonist, obscuring the ways in which Jimmy Gatz's investment in the dream produced the amoral Jay Gatsby. Third, the lush language used to describe the world of the wealthy makes it attractive despite the people like the Buchanans who populate it. (75)

The Great Gatsby offers a critique as well as an assessment of capitalist ideology and its effects in multidimensional perspectives about human phenomena in terms of social, political, ethical, moral and mental aspects. This novel similarly repackages and markets that ideology once again. This is the reason that the double movement of the text gives the closing line a special irony to make readers understand the fact that what should not be happening is

summarized by a text that also supplements the same structure. The quote begins: if we do “beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (*The Great Gatsby* 189), Lois Tyson again writes in her book that:

There is in this novel that which strengthens the back-flow, bearing us ceaselessly back under capitalism’s spell. In the end, Gatsby fails to realize the American dream, but because the novel falls prey to the capitalist ideology it condemns, many readers will continue to invest in it. (77)

CONCLUSIONS

Why we read and study literature if it’s the only a reflection of the *superstructure*? The answer is given by Louis Althusser who argues that the superstructure can and does influence the *base*. It means that ‘art’ can inspire revolution, so through literature, we can fight without shedding of blood and expose how the *bourgeoisie* enslaves the working class and how they control the society through hegemony with which they maintain power in capitalist societies. So, for the working class, they have to make rebellion and dismantle the ruling bourgeoisie of their economic and political power and then allocate the ownership in the hand of government. As we have seen how Tom’s quality of womanizing is not directed towards the same class of which he is a part of, so he behaves badly with working class because what attracted him is their powerlessness like Myrtle Wilson that how he broke her nose just to dare to say Daisy’s name his wife. Revolution of minds is possible only and can occur only if working class start reading critically about the structure of these discourses and they must start writing their own literature, dramas, poems, and novels, create their own music, and paint their own ideas. Then in this way, they can establish an alternate hegemony of resistance which will equalize bourgeoisie ethics.

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